

My Brother's Keeper: African Canadians and the American Civil War

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Review

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Prince, Bryan *My Brother's Keeper: African Canadians and the American Civil War*. Dundurn, \$26.99 ISBN 9781459705708

African Canadians Fighting for American Freedom

At the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War, it is timely to review two recent studies of Canadian involvement with the conflict. These monographs play a dual role as contributions to both Civil War history and to the under-researched field of the history of African Canadians in the nineteenth century. Other than occasional media stories and local events, Canadians in the period 2011 to 2015 have not paid much attention to America's most costly war. This is partly attributable to the government of Canada's attempts to promote a militarized patriotism by financially subsidizing commemoration of the War of 1812 and World War I and II. In contrast, Canadians (or more accurately, British North Americans) in the first half of the 1860s were intimately aware of the Civil War, through newspaper accounts, letters and personal experience. And more than one historian has attempted to make connections between the disruption and coerced reunification of the United States between 1861 and 1865 and the voluntary confederation of the United Canadas, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in 1867 into the Dominion of Canada. Starting in the 1960s academic historians such as Robin Winks, joined by amateurs, examined the Civil War's impact on Canada, particularly its politics and diplomatic relations. For the most part the limited number of studies that appeared in this fifty-year period fit under the heading 'Canadian-American Relations,' not military or social history. This began to change several years ago with the work of Jean Lamarre, a historian of French Canadian migration based at Canada's Royal Military College. His 2006 study of French Canadian participation in the Union army suggests that 12,000-20,000 served and that they were motivated mainly by the same force that brought even larger numbers of Québécois to New England: the quest for economic improvement.¹

Since the War of 1812, Canadians and British immigrants who migrated to Canada have fought in American wars at home and abroad. Richard Reid and Bryan Prince have produced complementary studies of an important but little known chapter of that contribution, African Canadians who volunteered to serve in the Union Army and the United States Navy (USN) during the Civil War. Historians commonly estimate that 50,000 men from Britain's North American colonies served in the Civil War, most of them for the Union. Many were living and working in the United States when they enlisted. Those who crossed the border to volunteer risked prosecution under The Foreign Enlistment Act but in practice this rarely took place. Aside from a few case studies or anecdotal accounts, in terms of English-speaking colonists we know little about the socio-economic profile of recruits, their motivation to fight, the circumstances of their recruitment, training and combat experiences or their post war lives. Until the publication of Reid's and Prince's studies, even less was known about the role of African Canadians. Canada's black population, with the addition of Caribbean and African immigrants during the twentieth century, is no longer dominated by the descendants of American slaves and free black refugees. But African Canadians, as they did during the Civil War and Reconstruction, continue to identify with the struggle for racial equality in the United States.

Britain's North American colonies received major influxes of blacks as a result of two wars with America. Between three and four thousand free and enslaved blacks arrived as part of the Loyalist migrations in 1783; most of them ended up in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Between 1815 and 1818 the Royal Navy transported two thousand men, women and children who had escaped or had been liberated from plantations on the coast of Georgia and the Chesapeake region to the Maritime colonies. Slavery was abolished by statute in Upper Canada in the 1790s and appears to have died out in all of the North American colonies by the 1820s. Starting in this decade fugitive slaves and free blacks began to migrate to Upper Canada (Canada West after 1840), the furthest end of the Underground Railroad. This meant by 1861 that a large percentage of the black population of Canada West (the census listed the total as 17,000) was American born, a contributing factor to their reactions to the Civil War. For most migrants formal freedom under the British flag was countered by prejudice, discrimination, exclusion and economic deprivation. As Reid's study indicates, the continual movement of African Canadians and African Americans back and forth across the border before, during and after the Civil War suggests a fluid situation and fluid identities.

Reid previously authored *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black in the Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008). His most recent study, through painstaking research and record linkage and a thorough grounding in the secondary literature, is a model of how social history methodology can enhance military history. His main body of primary sources, the military service and pension records held in the National Archives in Washington, are not without their challenges and limitations. Reid also is indebted to the Civil War African American Sailors Project, which has identified nearly 18,000 blacks in the USN. The author explains that he began his project by attempting to understand why men living in relative peace in a neighbouring country would volunteer to leave their families and risk life and limb to volunteer to fight for the Union. This was even riskier for African Canadians given threats by the Confederates early in the war to execute black prisoners, examples of atrocities such as the Fort Pillow and Plymouth massacres and the risk of being sold into slavery. There was also resistance to black recruitment by politicians and military officials in the North, the antagonism of Northern white soldiers and civilians and differential treatment in terms of pay, equipment, service and general treatment. The recruitment of blacks to the Union army, authorized in 1863, was hugely controversial and even supporters of the policy doubted that they could be effective soldiers. Specific grievances, which affected morale, discipline and desertion rates, included heavy labour duties and the inability of black NCOs to be promoted to the rank of officer.

Reid has determined that nearly 2,500 blacks from the colonies enlisted, including an estimated 1,247 American-born men residing in Canada West. Of 1,187 British North American-born recruits, 945 came from Canada West, 23 from Canada East, 119 from Nova Scotia, 95 from New Brunswick and 5 from Prince Edward Island. By occupation they were mariners, labourers, farmers, tradesman and workers in the service sector. Thirty per cent of the BNA-born joined the United States Navy. The recruits from Canada West constituted an impressive 13.7% of the official black population of the colony (Reid notes that historians continue to debate the accuracy of census enumerations of African Canadians). The average army service rate for the Northern states as a whole was 16.7% of the African American population and in New Jersey and New York it was 6.4% and 11% for both army and navy service. According to Reid, these figures "suggest that black recruits from the British colonies had a very strong disposition to support the Northern cause once emancipation became a war aim" (p.54). It is assumed that blacks, in contrast to the typical white Union recruit,

enlisted in order to fight slavery. Economic motivation appears to have been more of a factor for USN, which had a large minority of foreign-born sailors. Seafaring, as a number of historians have noted, was one of the more racially integrated occupations of the nineteenth century. Most British North American black sailors enlisted in New York and served in blockading squadrons along the Atlantic coast. *African Canadians in Union Blue* suggests a more complex set of factors, including financial incentives, behind volunteering for the army. The enlistment rate of British North American blacks increased starting in 1864 when the pay differential issue was addressed (p. 123). Other incentives were the bounties paid for substitutes once conscription was imposed in the North. One third of black army recruits from the four British colonies signed on as substitutes. Reid largely attributes the desertion rates for volunteers and substitutes (14.6%) to unfulfilled promises by the military command and the generally poor conditions under which many blacks served (pp. 136-42).

The book's chapter on post-war experiences explores issues such as the outmigration of Canadian blacks to the United States and the struggles of African Canadians veterans to adjust to peace, establish or re-establish family life and deal with medical and pension issues. Although many of its records have not survived, blacks were involved in a number of the eight posts of the Union veterans organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, that were established in three Canadian provinces. This is a well-researched and organized study that expands our knowledge of foreign involvement in the Civil War. It is also a major contribution to the scholarship on Canada's late nineteenth century black experience, a relatively neglected field. It is difficult to criticize this peer-reviewed contribution other than suggesting that readers may have benefited from more examples of the combat experience of the black soldiers and sailors under being studied.

The general reader will enjoy Bryan Prince's *My Brother's Keeper: African Canadians and the American Civil War*, published by a non academic press. Prince, who lives in North Buxton, Ontario, a community with ties to the Underground Railroad, is author of *One More River to Cross*, the story of his fugitive slave ancestor Isaac Brown. His book is more accessible to the non-specialist and has a slimmer bibliography, especially in terms of secondary sources. It is an interesting and effective overview of the topic that Reid addresses in a more quantitative fashion and relies heavily on biography and anecdote. It also serves as a chronicle of African Canadian resiliency in the face of adversity. The author depicts both Canadian-born and refugee blacks as

“unselfishly and courageously answering the call” of helping to end slavery (p. 9). Buxton, located near Windsor on Lake Erie, was founded as a community for escaped slaves in 1849. According to Prince, it produced not only Civil War volunteers, but also teachers, school principals, lawyers, doctors, ministers, newspaper editors, “two state senators, one member of congress[and] “one speaker of a state legislature” (p. 37).

The focus in Prince’s book is on the black men from the British colonies who volunteered for the Union army. He estimates that they numbered “well over eleven hundred” (p. 102). Black participation in the Union war effort, although contested, became a reality following the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation, which as Prince and other Canadian historians have noted, was controversial in the British colonies. Blacks from the colonies enlisted in ‘colored’ state infantry, artillery and cavalry regiments such as the 54th Massachusetts and the United States Colored Troops. By the end of the war, black units, who suffered much higher fatality rates than whites, largely because of disease, constituted ten per cent of the strength of the Union forces. Both authors detail the numerous hardships suffered by black soldiers and their families. In one chapter Prince discusses a number of engagements associated with African American units in which British colonists served, such as Fort Wagner, South Carolina, Olustee, Florida, the Battle of the Crater and New Market Heights, Virginia and Honey Hill, South Carolina. Both Reid and Prince devote chapters to black doctors and chaplains from Canada who served in the war. Alexander Augusta was a Virginia-born freeman who studied medicine at Toronto’s Trinity College. His colleague was Anderson Abbott, born in Toronto, who attended Oberlin College before attending Trinity for medical studies.

Prince’s discussion of black support for the war goes beyond individuals who volunteered to include recruiters and families and communities on the home front. One of the more interesting sections of his study is a chapter on the visit of the Freeman’s Inquiry Commission, created by the Secretary of War, to communities in Canada West with large black communities. Although not statistically reliable as ‘public opinion,’ interviews with former slaves and freeborn blacks, as well as white officials in London, Toronto, Chatham, Hamilton, Buxton, Windsor, Sandwich, Malden and St. Catharines, were a rough barometer of the racial views of the day. One of the issues discussed was whether blacks should live in segregated communities. The post-war experiences of African Canadian veterans, as with white veterans, were mixed. Many ended up in the United States and some were housed in the National Homes for

Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. With the cessation of hostilities and the end of slavery, former slaves sought kin south of the border and both black and white Canadians emigrated in large numbers in search a better life in the 1870s and 1880s.

In summary, the two monographs under review, although addressed to different audiences, complement each other and are excellent contributions to the themes of Canada and the Civil war and of the black experience in Canada. We now await the larger study of English-speaking British North American men who served in the USN and the Union army.

Greg Marquis teaches Canadian history at the University of New Brunswick Saint John. Recently he published the article "A War within a War: Canadian Reactions to D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation," Histoire sociale/Social History, XLVII (94) (June 2014): 421-42.

¹Jean Lamarre, *Les Canadiens Français et la Guerre de Sécession: 1861-1865: un autre dimension de leur migration aux Etas-Unis*. Québec: VLB Editeur, 2006.